



Who are 'Paraiyars', really?

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Comment

The New Sunday Times - 02/06/2011

WHILE in India recently, I bought a translation of *Moeurs, institutions et cérémonies des peuples de l'Inde* (Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies: The Classic First-Hand Account of India in the Early Nineteenth Century) by Abbé Dubois.

What interested me was the proximity of the year the book was first published — 1905 — to the period that is narrated by National Laureate Datuk Abdullah Hussain in his book *Interlok*. The index pages showed an entry of the word "pariah", which in Malaysia has been reduced to a mere letter for some reason.

The book throws new light on the subject.

Some highlights are reproduced below based on several reference sources (not limited to Dubois), including those by Indian scholars intended as exploratory reading.

The word "pariah" refers to members of the Paraiyar or Pariah caste. "Paraiyar" in Tamil means "a drummer (parai = drum)", although the origin of the word is still debatable.

It was not found in Tamil lexicon as late as the 11th century CE.

Contrary to stereotypical beliefs, for about 10 centuries, the Paraiyar "enjoyed a privileged position in the society of the Sangam period" from 3BCE to 3CE, the earliest period in the history of south India.



Hindu devotees carry milk pots as they perform their pilgrimage to Batu Caves temple during the Thaipusam festival in Kuala Lumpur this year. Festivals such as this help Malaysians to appreciate the cultures of others

There is no mention of "Paraiyar" in Sangam literature except on one occasion in a song prior to this. When the Sangam era ended, the situation in Tamil Nadu was still largely casteless.

Evidently, the Paraiyar had a long past, and "one in which they had independence, and possibly of great importance in the peninsula" of India. Certain privileges, it was suggested, could never have been gained from Orthodox Hinduism. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of them are on record employed as "advisers to kings", while some were "priests to Pallava kings before the introduction of the Brahmins", and even for a short while after it.

Generally the privileges, purportedly, were relics of an exceedingly long association with the land, and the turning point came when they lost their land. The farmers among them became poor and were treated as bonded labourers.

Genetics studies were even cited showing association between the Paraiyars and the Brahmins (generally, followers of Brahma), which apparently could be traced to their "conversions" by Aryan Brahmins.

Those who refused to do so were "casted out". Aryans already have tiered societal system supposedly similar to that of the Greeks. In the very early days, the separation between Paraiyars and the others "do not appear to be so marked as at present". But it worsened from the 13th century CE. Labelled the so-called "untouchables", they faced even more deprivation.

By the late 1800s, there were almost 350 different classes that made up the group.

Before their conversions, it was argued that Paraiyars were Buddhists, and they maintained many pre-Hindu beliefs that are unique to themselves.

Other pieces of evidence indicated that they were the original inhabitants of Tamil Nadu as part of the Mauryan Buddhist Empire for about 300 years. Following the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, Brahmanism emerged and became dominant. Despite this, Paraiyars at certain places reportedly still worshipped an 11th century statue of the Buddha, while at least one of their saints (allegedly Elango) was said to be a Buddhist.

In addition, five great Tamil literary epics also reflected several Buddhist principles. As to how the Buddhist

elements were lost, one reason cited was the revival of the Agamic cult, which existed mainly in south India then, and for most part preceded Buddhism. Interestingly, "the Agamas are out and out monotheistic", noted Professor Arunachalam of Tamil University at Tanjavur, and over time Paraiyars were known to convert to other monotheistic faiths.

This brief exposé is to demonstrate the possible "missing links" in seeking meaningful understanding of the real "pariah".

To superficially remove or substitute words is to ignore the wisdom: "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet!"

We need to dwell deep into the etymology and origin of the word so as to broaden the intellectual framework of the discussion.

A clear distinction between the word's relevance to the Indian Malaysian community and the nurturing of "Indian Malaysians" must be made so as to expedite the realisation of 1Malaysia concept.

And being Paraiyars is about being Malaysians first, with no particular relevance to the historical excesses of India. *Interlok* would then be given a new lease of life!

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